



Creating Realistic Scenes - Part I: Physical Description



“How do I create the world my characters live in?” A common question asked by most beginning writers, and one I have answered several times on an individual basis.

Start with a written sketch of the world. Much like a character sketch will give you a description, character traits, habits, et cetera, a written sketch of your world will serve as a reminder about temperature, region, flora, fauna, population, et cetera. But my world is Earth, you say, do I still have to create a sketch? Yes, absolutely. There are two reasons for this. The first, not all of your readers will have been to the area your story is set in. It is up to you to create it for them. Second, even if your reader has been to this area, Spain for example, the experiences will have been different. My view of Spain will not be the same as yours. Even if your setting is somewhere on Earth, it is still your world, as an author, and as such, your responsibility to show it to me, to make me feel like I am there. So, how do you do that? It isn't as hard as some imagine.

The trick is to remember to use all seven senses: taste, touch, sound, smell, sight, psychic (if applicable) and humor. Humans, by their very nature, are visual creatures. We rely primarily on our eyesight, hence the expressions, “I have to see it to believe it,” or “If I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes. . . .”

Because of this trait, a lot of authors, first-timers especially, forget humans have six more senses to work with. Make sure to use smell, taste, touch and sound as well, at the very least. (Psychic and humor aren't really viewed as human senses in writing for some reason). Trust me, if you put these details in there, your reader will never notice. We're visual, remember? However, if you leave them out, your scene is not real. It is flat, much like a painting. Pretty to look at, impossible to experience.

There are three basic commandments to follow to create dramatic, realistic scenes.

1. Be specific
2. Appeal to all the senses
3. Be a poet
 - 3a. Don't overdo the “Be a poet.”

Okay, so I've told you what to do, right? Now you're wondering how to do it. Here are some examples, beginning with Be specific. This is the type of non-specific scene most of write on a first draft.

When Mr. Blackwell arrived, the shuttle had already left. He cursed and paced on the sidewalk, wondering

what to do now. The shuttle made other stops; perhaps he could make it to one of them in time. He called a cab company and asked.

“No way,” said the dispatcher. “A cab couldn’t get to you for at least another two hours. There’s a convention in town.”

“Yes, I know. I am trying to get there,” replied Mr. Blackwell. “I can’t wait two hours.”

He hung up the phone. There had to be a way to get to the convention. He cursed and paced some more.

Suddenly, he had an idea. A rental car. What if he rented a car? He looked out the bus station window. A yellow Hertz sign revolved on a pole across the street.

This scene doesn’t have much in the way of “specific” in it. The reader has to use so much imagination to fill in the gray areas, the story is lost. Here is a rewrite of the same scene.

When George Blackwell arrived at the Raintree Shuttle station, he found the 2:30 shuttle to the convention center had already left, rapidly disappearing in a cloud of foul-smelling diesel exhaust. He paced back and forth on the sidewalk, cursing and muttering to himself, trying to figure out what to do. The convention center was over an hour away, driving time, so walking was out of the question. A cab. He could call the taxi company and still get there in plenty of time before the meeting began.

Spotting a pay phone, George quickly deposited a quarter, listening impatiently as it clanged and clunked into the receptacle. A dial tone rewarded him. He punched in the number for the local taxi service and listened to the tinny rings. Finally, on the fifth ring, a woman answered. Her Brooklyn accent was so thick he could barely understand her. Summoning patience, George asked about a cab.

“No way,” replied the nasally feminine voice. Gum popped. “A cab couldn’t get to you for at least another two hours. There’s a convention in town.”

“I know,” replied George. “I am trying to get to it. My presence is very important. What if I paid double the fare and a thirty dollar tip for the driver?”

“Doesn’t matter,” came the Brooklyn voice. “All the cabs are busy. Money isn’t going to change that.”

Frustrated and growing increasingly angry with himself, George hung up.

He paced and cursed some more, trying to come up with another solution. He glanced out the terminal window and spotted a yellow sign across the street. The word “Hertz” slowly revolved about dozens of shiny cars.

He could rent a car and still make the convention. His problem was solved.

Granted, it’s not going to win any prizes, but you can see the difference in the two examples. The generalities such as the shuttle terminal and the phone call are more specific. Granted the scene is not complete because it is primarily visual, the only sounds being provided by the pay phone quarter and the dispatcher’s voice. Taste, touch, sound and smell should also be added at the very least. The sixth sense, or psychic premonitions, such as *deja vu*, may also be added. Adding these qualities leads to the second example: Appeal to the senses.

When George Blackwell arrived at the Raintree Shuttle station, he found the 2:30 shuttle to the conven-

tion center had already left, rapidly disappearing in a cloud of foul-smelling, greasy-tasting diesel exhaust. He paced back and forth on the sidewalk, cursing and muttering to himself, trying to figure out what to do. A dusty Kansas wind blew forgotten candy and gum wrappers, swirling them around George's impatient feet before depositing them in the gutter.

The convention center was over an hour away, driving time, so walking was out of the question. Not to mention his new shoes rubbed. Blisters he didn't need.

The wind picked up again, filling his nose with the intermittent aroma of hamburgers and frying chicken. Somewhere, a charcoal fire added its own aroma of roasting hot dogs to the teasing breeze.

George's stomach growled painfully at the thought of the catered lunch that would be missed. Skipping breakfast to catch the shuttle hadn't helped after all.

Absently, he stuck one hand in his pocket as he paced. Cool metal met George's palm. A quarter. George looked quickly around and spotted a graffiti-covered payphone on the far wall. He could call a cab.

The floor around the phone smelled of stale urine and other less pleasant, unidentifiable odors. Using his handkerchief, George deposited the quarter, hope surging through him. George waited impatiently as it clanged and clunked into the receptacle. A dial tone rewarded him. He punched in the number for the local taxi service and listened to the tinny rings. Finally, on the fifth ring, a woman answered. Her Brooklyn accent was so thick he could barely understand her. Summoning patience, George asked about a cab.

"No way," replied the nasally feminine voice. Gum popped loudly as she spoke. "A cab couldn't get to you for at least another two hours. There's a convention in town."

"I know," replied George. "I am trying to get to it. My presence is very important. What if I paid double the fare and a thirty dollar tip for the driver?"

After a moment of hesitation, the Brooklyn voice answered. "Doesn't matter. All the cabs are busy. Money isn't going to change that."

Frustrated and growing increasingly angry with himself, George hung up.

He paced and cursed some more, trying to come up with another solution. He glanced out the terminal window and spotted a yellow sign across the street. The word "Hertz" slowly revolved about dozens of shiny cars.

He could rent a car and still make the convention. His problem was solved.

See the difference? Granted, this scene isn't going to win any more prizes than the first two, but it is evolving. More description could be added if the author desired., such as horns honking, a confrontation with the Raintree Shuttle manager, et cetera.

Now we come to the final commandment, and its underling. Be a poet, but don't overdo it.

Be a poet. Easily said, you say, but not so easily done. And you're right. So, what does "Be a poet" mean for a novelist? It means use figures of speech to give the effect, including personification of inanimate objects, hyperbole, metaphors and similes.

What is personification of inanimate objects? Simple. It means to give human qualities to these objects. For example, “I love my computer, but it hates me.” Computers aren’t capable of hate, but by giving one this human emotion you have added realism to the sentence.

What is hyperbole? Hyperbole is nothing more than exaggeration. “My boss has the disposition of a Nazi leader.” Does he really? Chances are, he doesn’t, but by using this exaggeration you have given the reader the impression that the boss is not a nice man.

What is metaphor? A metaphor is an implied comparison between two objects. For example, “George stuck his hand into the blender and turned it into hamburger.” Now let’s not get caught up in why George did that without turning it off. For this example, it doesn’t matter. The metaphor here gives the implied comparison between George’s hand and hamburger; two things that wouldn’t normally be compared. However, many metaphors have been so overused they’ve become cliches, such as, “Time flies when you’re having fun.” Avoid cliches.

What is a simile? Like a metaphor, a simile is a comparison. However, it is a direct comparison as opposed to an implied one, and uses “like” or “as.” For example, “He’s as white as a ghost.” Granted this is cliché, but it gets the point across. A better example would be, “Sarah’s boyfriend was as exciting as vanilla ice cream.” Again, avoid cliches.

A good figure of speech should not only come across as clever to the reader, but also have a certain resonance. In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens describes Scrooge as being, “solitary as an oyster.” This is apt on two levels. Not only is an oyster all closed up alone in its shell, it is slimy as well, much like Scrooge before the reformation.

Whenever you write narrative, write down any figures of speech as they come to you, even if they sound dumb. After all, you can always tinker with the wording later. But be careful of the cliches, unless you are writing comedy. The overused ones, such as “blind as a bat” or “eats like a horse,” will muddy your otherwise brilliant prose.

Additionally don’t use similes in long strings, such as “she was as tall as a telephone pole, and thin,” and don’t mix metaphors, such as, “he captained his ship over the sands of time.” Don’t compare nautical terms to land. It doesn’t work.

If you use allusions, make sure your reader will understand. For example, an author might try to avoid the old cliché of “he smelled like rotten eggs” by writing, “he smelled like SO₂” instead, not taking into account that the reader might not know the chemical composition of sulfur.

Don’t stretch your comparisons to the point of tedium. For example, don’t write, “The long dead trees stretched toward the sky like the skeletal fingers of a monster, blackened by years in the earth, gnarled and twisted from the struggle for freedom, yet still as tall and strong as living wood.” It’s too much.

Be careful when you do make comparisons. Some resonate very wrong. “Stars speckled the sky like scars on a smallpox victim.” Not a comparison that should be made. You also need to be careful when using comparison to describe something revolting. “He held his breath against the stench, watching bubbles burst from the green sewage like sparkling wine.” Again, it doesn’t work.

In addition, resist the extravagant, such as, “Her eyes were like South African emeralds set among Australia-

lian opals by a master jeweler,” and don’t combine the literal and the figurative in your description. “George Washington is the father of our country and two sons.” Did George Washington has two sons? I don’t know, but it works for an example of what not to do.

So, how do you follow the sub-commandment of “don’t overdo the ‘Be a poet?’” Simple. By not overusing any one method of description for every item, person, place, et cetera in your story.

You may also want to filter your descriptions of the scene through your characters. Describe the scene as your character sees it. Occasionally, have him misinterpret what is seen as well. This too will add realism to your story.

To sum up everything above, your narrative should contain time, color, texture, et cetera. It should convey a sense of motion as well. Finally, it should appeal to the seven senses: taste, touch, sound, smell, sight, psychic (if applicable) and humor.



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